

Report

Iran: archaeological heritage in crisis Developing an effective management system for archaeology

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Abstract

The dynamic social development in Iran over the last decades provided the acknowledgement of the archaeological heritage on the one hand, and a confrontation to the current managing system of archaeology on the other. This situation makes it necessary for archaeologists to formulate and implement a systematic regulation in the sphere of protection and management of the archaeological heritage. The fact is that, as the international conventions warn, the archaeological heritage is constantly under threat of destruction, and while in Iran the problem is not new, the destruction is on the increase. The constructions under the developmental projects and at the same time the increase of population are accompanied by the expansion of the new settled areas threaten large areas of archaeological sites. The deep economic crises of the country as well as a pauperization of majority of society, and a low degree of respect for the law, lead to an increase in looting and considerable damage to the archaeological heritage. The goals of this paper are (1) to identify problems that hinder the effectiveness of the Iranian national protection acts, and to suggest some way in which these problems could be remedied, (2) to promote further academic discussions of problems and solutions within archaeology and related fields, and (3) to encourage official authorities and other interest groups to press for changes needed in the Iranian national protection policies, to make it better serve the public interest.

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1. Introduction

There is a general agreement that the primary social contribution of archaeology is the information about past human history that can be provided by the systematic study of the material remains of that history using appropriate archaeological methods. Understanding the full range of past culture also contributes to understanding the diverse cultures of the present. From this standpoint the conservation and management of the archaeological record is important in order to ensure that archaeological studies can continue to provide society with new information about the human past. In addition to being sources of information, archaeological sites and artifacts have a variety of meanings and values to numerous groups in society, and they often evoke in visitors a direct sense of connection with

the past ([1] pp. 201) [2]. The archaeological past is being presented to the Iranian public in a way that is inappropriate to the development and advancement of the society's cultural processes, and the discipline of archaeology. In the process of reshaping the Iranian archaeological and historical past little effort is made to communicate with the people whose past is being reshaped. For archaeology to take on some significance in the minds of the general public, archaeologists need to actively begin to challenge the political, ideological and chauvinistic interpretations of the archaeological past, and communicate their discipline to all sectors of society. Administrations and management of the political, economic, educational, and tourism dimensions of Iran's archaeological heritage have not been developed, more or less simultaneously with archaeological research. This fact has contributed to confusion at all levels about their relationship to the discipline of archaeology. In this respect it appears increasingly clear that archaeological heritage management (AHM) in Iran needs to take the responsibility for integrated management of archaeological heritage

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through a conscious and systematic preparation of its personnel and modernizing its institutional infrastructure.

Academic programs such as those at the universities of the developed countries, which offer complete academic programs in the specialty of cultural and AHM, reinforce awareness in our country about this concern. It is clear that the preparation of specialists in the conservation and management of archaeological sites is an urgent necessity in the Iranian context. This is true not only in terms of the academic importance of being current on new areas of research, but because of the tremendous loss of cultural and archaeological material through the absence of management plans and programs which assure the integrity of archaeological heritage in its natural and cultural setting. The two principal causes of such losses are the over looting of archaeological sites [3], and incompleteness of decision making incompatible with the goal of heritage management. Thus, this specialty should constitute a new profession in Iran covering the pressing necessities of organizing, planning, researching, and regulating the uses of cultural and archaeological heritage.

2. Problems

The problems faced by archaeology in general and AHM in particular is generally akin to the difficulties encountered by Iranian society as a whole. The most important problems include: (a) The deep economic crisis of the post-war situation and its continuation that affects the amount of funding allocated to basic science and research. In archaeology it causes a considerable restriction in field activities and the necessary heritage management strategies. Only a few research excavations with central budgeting have been carried out in the last few years. (b) A major problem arises from the uncertainty in decision making by various authorities that are appointed generally for non-scientific considerations. The lack of a specified policy and the frequent change in the position of managers make any long-term planning for archaeology impossible. Under such circumstances even the current short-term activities are also questionable. In this respect another problem stems from the disintegration of archaeological institutes. A major controversy surrounds the capability of the Cultural Heritage Organization (CHO) in managing archaeology. In fact, two rival archaeological centers (CHO and universities) each claiming the right to represent archaeology. (c) Almost all archaeological teaching and training has been centered in Tehran. The long and short specialist courses have been so few in number that is impossible to speak of there being a national program or policy. Foreign scientific literature in related courses coming into Iranian libraries is sporadic and limited due to the absence of links with the experienced institutions in the rest of the world. Professional training for students is inadequate and deeply affects the level of their capabilities. (d) Iranian archaeological law on the protection of archaeological sites lacks a basic ability to protect sites from threats resulting from either treasure hunting or developmental projects. Theoretically, a small number of scheduled monuments are properly preserved because special permits for any alteration at such sites is needed.

(e) Iranian officials are less willing to finance pure research projects and institutions responsible for development infrastructure do not feel obliged to pay for research ([4] pp. 174–5). After an initial review of issues [4], I focus on some issues where there appeared to be problem or obstacles to achieving a more efficient and effective AHM system and a national archaeological program in Iran. Effective management of the archaeological heritage requires the following.

2.1. Institutionalizing AHM

AHM is regarded to have political and cultural roles, and through its process archaeology is often given social authority as it seen to impact upon and given meaning to the past. In addition AHM also provides archaeology with institutional authority. Such authority reinforces archaeology's social authority, and ensures archaeology a role in the processes and strategies employed to archaeological management system. For example, the contestation identity and interpretations of the past, have important political and cultural implications, thus it was argued that AHM fulfills a cultural and political role and through it archaeology becomes directly engaged, and often aligned in arbitrating on social and cultural conflicts ([5] pp. 61). One of the most important elements for an AHM specialist is to understand both the internal structure of institutions that affect the subject area and the web of external relations that create its environment. In this sense, it is critical to change the tendency to leave to political appointees and the management of policies that affect archaeological heritage [6].

2.2. Improving implementation of the evaluation systems

One of the major issues facing AHM in Iran today is an issue that must be faced by archaeologists in both AHM and academia. This is the issue of significance. How we define the significance of archaeological heritage is pivotal in determining where we perform an archaeological survey, what methods we use for the survey, how we investigate the sites and how we treat the sites, once we find them, in terms of excavation, analysis, preservation, and management. How Iranian archaeology determining significance, is now being scientifically questioned: why is a particular site or group of sites important? Is it worth spending our limited money and time on the identification, evaluation, and treatment of the sites? These and many others are the questions being asked. A central problem in AHM is how the significance of archaeological heritage can be established, and which parts of the archaeological heritage are of significance and need to be selected for the management processes such as recording and protecting [7]. In recent years there have been numerous attempts, especially on the theoretical sides, resulted in recognition that all archaeological materials are important for their potential contribution to scientific research or to social and political processes ([8] pp. 43–48). Scientific significance: it is commonly applied to sites that contain or likely contain information bearing on an important archaeological research question. The site must have characteris-

tics suggesting the likelihood that, it possesses configurations of artifacts, soil strata, structural remains, or other natural or cultural features that make it possible to do the followings: test a hypothesis or hypotheses about events, or processes in the past that bear on important research questions in the social or natural sciences or the humanities, or corroborate or amplify currently available information suggesting that a hypothesis is either true or false, or reconstruct the sequence of archaeological cultures for the purpose of identifying and explaining continuities and discontinuities in the archaeological record of particular area [9] pp. 48–52 [10] pp. 28–29 [11] pp. 257). This criterion states that the evaluation of archaeological sites, is based on the evaluation of data sets and their patterning within the framework of research question that yield information [12]. This criterion has not been addressed by Iranian AHM system, and no one in academic or government preservation agencies has even partially sought to evaluate the results of this long effort. The problem is that, the focus of preservation authorities has been, and continues to be, on the preservation of archaeological monuments of national importance, not to synthesize their results. Further, the government agencies cannot perform such syntheses, given the lack of professional skills, cost restrictions of their projects, and the narrow scope of their efforts. The result is that, each year tens of thousand of archaeological materials are accumulating in the preservation agencies' shelves and there has been no concerted effort to evaluate these data. These agencies are just now beginning to get a handle on the number of type of sites recorded under their jurisdiction, let alone their association to research issues. The possible way to overcome this problem will be attempting to pull together the huge amounts of data built over the years. So it would be better to make a decision to stop another survey, another site excavation, and put time and money toward grappling with all of the information that have been collected. Some of the monies that are going each year for the new excavation projects can be diverted for the use of developing a synthesis on the archaeological sites, based on the many past projects in the areas. By tacking such steps, we will be initiating the development of a framework by which to weigh and measure significance based on an actual database. Current system may be able to protect particular type of sites, but beyond these areas there is virtually no control at all. As a result a part from a few well-preserved monuments, many of archaeological sites from other types are in danger without any meaningful research and study.

2.3. Improving implementation of the National Protection Legislation

It seems that the concepts underlying heritage protection and its implementing regulations in Iran are almost naive. The process established by heritage protection allows archaeological and cultural values to be considered while projects proceed with minimal standards of mitigation. Although provincial agencies have the primary responsibility for taking into account the effects of their actions on cultural heritage, they do so under rules promulgated by the Advisory Council for

CHO. Heritage protection act calls for the development by government agencies of comprehensive programs for the identification, evaluation, consideration during project planning, protection, and management of significant cultural heritage, including archaeological resources [13]. Few agencies have been able to develop such programs, yet this kind of approach offers flexibility and a broader view and needs a broader range of knowledge and methodologies that are not still available in Iran. Given this context, it seems that the cultural heritage protection act needs to be applied more flexibly and with more focus on successful and timely outcomes, rather than on formal process. In this sense CHO must make a genuine effort to encourage more flexibility and common sense in applying national cultural heritage act, rather than just giving lip service to this goal. We need to move away from an almost exclusive emphasis on national monument preservation act toward an emphasis on methods and techniques to optimize rescue archaeology, as the modern world increasingly obliges us to deal with fragmented sites (mainly prehistoric sites) in danger of disappearing. At the same time CHO needs to get out of their current roles as dominant regulators and decision-makers and return to their roles as advisers to the provincial agencies. CHO should focus on programmatic issues and play a mediating role for cases involving conflict and controversy. There is also a need for more specific criteria that should be developed for National Register eligibility to eliminate many of the wasteful and unproductive efforts now being done as part of cultural heritage conservation.

2.4. Increasing professional knowledge and expertise at all levels of AHM

The problems experienced in AHM in Iran, were not failures of system or process, but some of which are related to structural flaws in the overall management system while others refer to the practice of practitioners, whether they are regulators or researchers. It was felt that increasing the professionalism of personnel throughout the system would increase its effectiveness and accountability ([14] pp. 110). Training should be improved for archaeologists entering the AHM field, whether as consultants, regulators, or resource managers. The knowledge, skills, and abilities required for these positions should be assessed, and both academic and on the job training should be modified to ensure that these knowledge, skills, and abilities are effectively taught. Archaeologists need to achieve and be held accountable to appropriate standards and qualifications. The academic qualification standards, standards of research performance and code of ethics should apply to all personnel employed as professional archaeologists by the university departments and CHO. Professional skills should include the ability to bring archaeology to the general public ([15] pp. 405). There is also more opportunities are needed for continuing education of archaeologists in practical approaches to doing cultural heritage management. Archaeological departments and educational institutions can form partnerships to offer such opportunities.

2.5. Making better use of existing information in decision making about archaeological heritage

How we justify spending additional time and money on the new fieldwork projects? While through each fieldwork numerous amounts of archaeological materials recovered, find their ways to the treasure stores without comprehensive studies. On the other hand it was recognized that information generated by CHO often remains obscure and difficult to access. As a result, costly decisions regarding fieldworks and impact mitigation are often made without adequate consideration of the results of previous works. To this end syntheses and reassessments of the result of previous works should be prepared at the state or regional level, and should focus on the characteristics of the archaeological record and substantive results useful in making decisions about registration of archaeological heritage eligibility and archaeological value ([16] pp. 409–411). At the same time advisory panels of experienced archaeologists should regularly be employed by heritage managers at various levels to offer advice on project research designs and strategies and otherwise assist in developing flexible, creative management solutions.

2.6. Implementing public archaeology concepts on heritage management

Within academic archaeology, the interest in more extensive dissemination of archaeology to a wider audience can be seen as part of the much wider debate that has discussed the role and value of the past, as an element of public heritage (e.g. [6,17,18]). Philosophy behind the above statement is that the modern world archaeological public is more interested in ideas than merely recovering and describing evidence ([19] pp. 691) and the only way Iranian archaeologists can address this demand is to produce informed interpretive papers and dissemination of archaeological knowledge ([1] pp. 119–122 [16] pp. 410 [20] pp. 13–15). The reason, why the world is looking for interpretation is that, archaeology must be relevant to society at large and to the human and social sciences in particular ([19] pp. 692). There is also a growing acknowledgement that archaeology is always socially engaged ([21] pp. 22) [22], directly linked to ideologies and political uses ([23] pp. 192), and that, the way we interpret the past cannot be divorced from the way we perceive the present. Archaeology as a mode of production of the past ([24] pp. 34), assembles the past, and is a discipline inevitably linked to the public in general ([25] pp. 82). Archaeologists have been confronting complex dilemmas when people are excluded from power of the past [26], see also [27]. Archaeology is the only social science that can provide access to all social groups, not only elites, but also peasants, natives, nomads, slaves, craftsmen or others ([28] pp. 385), and for this reason ordinary people could recognize themselves in what we as archaeologists offer them see [29] for a similar review [30,31].

What should archaeologists do to ensure that the knowledge that they generate about the past finds its way meaningfully

into the public domain and contributes to debates and literature surrounding the issues of cultural development in Iran? This short review tries to introduce to the archaeology of Iran the belief that, an extension of the way in which the archaeology is studied and understood by students and the general public would be ideal and if this can be achieved, will enhance the awareness of Iranian society as a whole, for a similar conclusion see [27,22]. What can be gained from the appreciation of archaeology by the general public will be at least a greater level of protection for archaeological sites and in general, help the promotion of AHM ([32] pp. 231) [22]. How the past is represented and communicated is the significant aspect here, as ideological and political processes at work in Iran, affect such knowledge resources. In Iran today, as during the last regime, some versions of the past are highly visible and are highlighted; others may be hidden, overlooked or intentionally excluded. According to Hodder ([33] pp. 278), the study of the prehistoric past can be a political act, it seems that, the most fundamental reason for the lack of support for education for prehistory in Iran, may originate from the politics or ideology of the previous and present authorities. In addition to the potential benefits in informing Iranian society, further steps will need to be taken:

(a) Archaeologists need to actively challenge the traditional perspectives of archaeology and carefully consider the language and terminology used by the discipline to present and interpret the past [24]. (b) Inclusion of archaeology in formal and informal education programs, to appreciate the vitality of the AHM and its role in modern achievements; and expansion and modernizing archaeological departments in the large universities. (c) Emphasis on the general public's interest in archaeology through programs provided by academic institutions. (d) Balancing the past and the present by enlightening the general public on the norms and values of Iranian archaeological heritage. (e) A comprehensive policy for museum collection, and training appropriate personnel, as well as establishing an education office in museums to link with public interests and the educational system of the country must be one of the priorities of the State ([34] pp. 300–6). In such a way adequate budgets and necessary equipment should be prepared. At the same time active encouragement should be given to the establishment of local authority or community museums, since the objects collected by museums in local and community levels have great popularity and archaeological significance: (g) a significantly greater share of funds going into the national archaeological program should be devoted to providing direct public benefits, such as site visits, museum displays, school education programs, and quality treatment of synthesized archaeological results in print and visual media. CHO and individual archaeologists must modify existing practices and regulations, if necessary to provide greater and more rapid public access to the results of public archaeology: (h) archaeologists need to recognize legitimate claims made by ethnic groups and other groups regarding the treatment of archaeological sites, but they must also take responsibility for defining and defending the public value of the knowledge that only archaeology can provide [4].

3. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to monitor recent developments in the managements of archaeological heritage system. Several trends are apparent. First, the recognition that a highly centralized body operating dominantly a specifically heritage protection legislation and management, is no longer adequate on its own to ensure the protection of our heritage. Secondly, there is a general recognition that archaeology becoming a material consideration in the social, economic educational and planning processes. The appreciation of archaeology reinforces those considerations to be weighed in the balance against the other unwilling factors affecting our society (e.g. loosing identity). Finally, for AHM the key to success lies in multidisciplinary management plans based on national consensus and a clear definition of organizational role.

The recommendations here are not designed to serve as a political action; instead these recommendations will have a positive influence on the multiple and diffuse efforts to rethink and renew our national archaeological programs that are currently under way. The preliminary results of the concept may be to raise consciousness about the issues, largely within the archaeological profession, and to promote discussion of these issues and possible solutions to the associated problems. Most of the recommendations developed here, are at this point and stated in a much-generalized manner. Archaeologists, heritage managers, and others participating in the national archaeological program need to consider how and whether the proposed solutions might work on the ground, and provide feedback to the concept.

It should be stressed here that many of the problems identified here, were amenable to solution by changes in practice, but that some might require regulatory change. One of the debates that stand at the center of the issues is debate challenging the effectiveness of existing regulatory system. I believe that the current system is slow, impenetrable, and inconsistent, and that the existing system acts as an impediment to development, at least when applied inconsistently. The regulation may be effective, but need to be improved by legislation change, clear policy guidance, knowledge and understanding. At the same time there is a demand for greater transparency and democratic participation of all experts. The best way to increase the effectiveness of regulation is therefore, probably the provision of better information and skills to ensure that the right decisions are taken speedily, confidently, and consistently.

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